

Message Text

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ACTION AF-10

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 HA-05 L-03 H-01 SSO-00 NSCE-00

SS-15 ICAE-00 ICA-11 INRE-00 CIAE-00 INR-10

NSAE-00 (ISO) W

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O 121445Z APR 78

FM AMEMBASSY LILONGWE

TO SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 1790

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 3 LILONGWE 0545

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: SHUM, PDIP, OVIP, MI (BANDA, H. KAMUZU)

REF: STATE 092265

SUMMARY: THERE HAS BEEN NO PUBLIC NOTICE OR OTHER COMMENT RE AUSTIN MBISA'S DEATH. HOWEVER, THIS IN ITSELF IS NOT UNUSUAL OR ESPECIALLY SIGNIFICANT IN TODAY'S MALAWI. HIS BROTHER, PETER, BELIEVES IT WAS SUICIDE AS REPORTED TO HIM BY POLICE AND DOES NOT SUSPECT FOUL PLAY, ALTHOUGH HE IS NOT COMPLETELY SATISFIED WITH EVERY ASPECT OF THE CASE.

A REPORT OF AUSTIN'S BEHAVIOR ON THE DAY PRECEDING HIS DEATH FROM ONE OF HIS FRIENDS WHO WAS STAYING AT THE SAME GOVERNMENT HOSTEL IN ZOMBA SUGGESTS THAT HE WAS IN A DISTURBED EMOTIONAL STATE, APPARENTLY AFTER BEING CONFRONTED BY A LETTER IN HIS FILE AT THE UNIVERSITY BY THE REGISTRAR ON FEB. 6, THE DAY HE REPORTED FOR DUTY. IN THIS LETTER (WHICH HAD BEEN INADVERTENTLY INCLUDED IN A FILE SENT FROM THE STATES IN SUPPORT OF HIS PETITION TO STAY ON AT INDIANA UNTIL HE HAD OBTAINED HIS PHD.), HE HAD APPARENTLY STATED OR INDICATED A DESIRE NOT TO RETURN TO MALAWI BECAUSE OF POLITICAL CONDITIONS THEN PREVAILING. HE APPARENTLY OFFERED TO GO AND TALK
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WITH THE POLICE ABOUT IT AND DID SO ON THE 6TH. CHIEF OF THE POLICE SPECIAL BRANCH, ITIMU, TOLD PETER THE POLICE DID NOT REGARD THE MATTER AS SERIOUS AND HE WAS NOT TAKEN INTO CUSTODY. POLICE HAD TOLD HIM THEY WISHED TO QUESTION HIM FURTHER AT THE HOSTEL ON THE MORNING OF FEB. 8 AND OFFICER SENT TO DO THIS FOUND HE HAD HUNG HIMSELF. EMBASSY STRONGLY DOUBTS THAT THERE WAS ANY DIRECT POLICE

INVOLVEMENT IN HIS DEATH BUT IT HAS NOT DISCLOSED ITS POSSESSION OF ABOVE INFORMATION TO GOM AUTHORITIES. EMBASSY HAS REPORTED ITS INTEREST IN THIS CASE TO SECRETARY TO PRESIDENT, JOHN NGWIRI, AND HOPES TO HAVE A FURTHER, OFFICIAL, REPORT TOMORROW. END SUMMARY.

1. EMBASSY HAS HEARD A RUMOR LAST WEEK THAT AUSTIN MBISA HAD COMMITTED SUICIDE WHILE STAYING AT THE GOVERNMENT HOSTEL IN ZOMBA, BUT THERE HAS BEEN NO PUBLIC NOTICE OR NEWS OF HIS DEATH. THIS IS NOT UNUSUAL IN ITSELF. SUICIDES ARE RARELY IF EVER REPORTED IN THE NEWS MEDIA CERTAINLY IN PART TO PREVENT EMBARRASSMENT TO THE FAMILIES AND IN THIS CASE, WE PRESUME, TO PREVENT POSSIBLE EMBARRASSMENT TO THE UNIVERSITY.

2. EMBASSY/ICA FILES REFLECT THAT MBISA REQUESTED AN EXTENTION OF HIS TIME IN THE U.S. IN ORDER THAT HE MIGHT CONTINUE HIS STUDIES AT INDIANA, AFTER RECEIVING HIS MASTERS DEGREE, TO OBTAIN A PH.D. BASED ON THE IIE AND UNIV. OF INDIANA RECOMMENDATIONS, THE EMBASSY SUPPORTED THIS REQUEST AT THE OFFICE OF THE VICE CHANCELLOR OF THE UNIVERSITY. THE VICE CHANCELLOR REJECTED THE REQUEST IN FORTHRIGHT TERMS, POINTING OUT THAT IT HAS BEEN LONGSTANDING FIRM GOM POLICY THAT PERSONS LEAVING MALAWI IN PURSUIT OF GRADUATE STUDIES MUST RETURN TO MALAWI AND TEACH OR OTHERWISE EXERCIZE THEIR SPECIALTIES BEFORE
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BEING GIVEN APPROVAL TO GO ABROAD AGAIN FOR A MORE ADVANCED DEGREE. IN GENERAL, THE EMBASSY AGREES WITH THIS POSITION IN THAT ALMOST EVERY GRADUATE STUDENT GOING ABROAD TRIES TO PROLONG HIS STAY BEYOND THE AGREED-UPON PERIOD AND IF SUCH STUDENTS STAY ON TOO LONG, IT IS NOT ONLY MORE AND MORE DIFFICULT TO GET THEM TO RETURN BUT IS PROGRESSIVELY MORE DISRUPTIVE TO UNIVERSITY FACULTY AND OTHER INSTITUTIONAL PLANNING. AS BEST WE CAN TELL, MBISA WAS ALLOWED TO STAY UNTIL HE FINISHED LAST FALL'S SEMESTER ABOUT THE END OF NOVEMBER AND THEN RETURNED TO MALAWI AND STAYED FOR ABOUT AMONTH WITH HIS BROTHRER HERE IN LILONGWE AND THEN WENT TO STAY WITH HIS FATHER IN A VILLAGE TO THE NORTH OF KARONGA.

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INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 SSO-00 ICAE-00 HA-05 L-03 H-01
SS-15 NSCE-00 INRE-00 CIAE-00 INR-10 NSAE-00
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 2 OF 3 LILONGWE 0545

3. THIS MORNING I ASKED AUSTIN MBISA'S BROTHER, PETER MBISA, CHIEF ECONOMIST IN THE OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT, WHOM I HAVE KNOWN PERSONALLY FOR SOME TIME, IF HE WOULD STOP BY THE RESIDENCE BEFORE HE WENT TO WORK. REPORTED BELOW IS HIS STORY OF THE EVENTS LEADING UP TO THIS TRAGEDY.

4. ON FEB. 5 PETER MBISA DROVE HIS BROTHER TO ZOMBA AND LEFT HIM AT THE GOVERNMENT HOSTEL WHERE THE UNIVERSITY HAD PROVIDED HIM WITH TEMPORARY QUARTERS UNTIL HIS FACULTY HOUSING COULD BE MADE AVAILABLE. AUSTIN MBISA WAS IN GOOD SPIRITS AND PLEASED THAT HIS CLEARANCE PROCEDURE HAD BEEN COMPLETED AND THAT HE WOULD BE JOINING THE FACULTY AT CHANCELLOR COLLEGE. PETER RECEIVED A TELEPHONE CALL ON WEDNESDAY MORNING FEB. 8 ASKING HIM TO COME URGENTLY TO ZOMBA AND, UPON ARRIVAL THE
E, RECEIVED THE
WORD THAT HIS BROTHER HAD COMMITTED SUICIDE BY HANGING HIMSELF IN HIS ROOM THE PREVIOUS NIGHT. FROM TALKS WITH A GOOD FRIEND OF HIS BROTHER WHO HAD BEEN WITH HIM IN THE HOSTEL AND HIS TALK WITH THE CHIEF OF POLICE SPECIAL BRANCH, MR. ITUMI, HE LEARNED THAT AUSTIN, UPON REPORTING TO THE REGISTRAR AT THE UNIVERSITY ON MONDAY, HAD BEEN SHOWN A LETTER
WHICH WAS INCLUDED IN A FILE WHICH HAD BEEN
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SENT FROM THE STATES TO THE UNIVERSITY IN SUPPORT OF HIS APPLICATION TO EXTEND HIS STAY AT INDIANA, IN WHICH AUSTIN APPARENTLY SAID SOMETHING TO THE EFFECT THAT IN ADDITION TO HIS DESIRE TO GET A PH.D., HE DID NOT WISH TO RETURN TO MALAWI JUST THEN BECAUSE OF THE POLITICAL CONDITIONS IN THE COUNTRY. ACCORDING TO PETER, AUSTIN SAID HE WOULD BE GLAD TO TALK TO THE POLICE ABOUT IT AND HE WAS APPARENTLY SENT TO THE SPECIAL BRANCH TO DO SO

THAT SAME DAY (MONDAY, FEB. 6). THE NEXT DAY, ACCORDING TO HIS FRIEND AT THE HOSTEL, MBISA WAS EXTREMELY MOROSE AND ONLY SEMI-COHERENT IN HIS REMARKS, MUTTERING THAT HE HAD BEEN "BETRAYED". THAT NIGHT HE WENT TO THE HOSTEL BAR BUT DID NOT DRINK WITH ANYONE WHICH WAS VERY CONTRARY TO HIS NORMAL BEHAVIOR. PETER MBISA TOLD ME MR. ITIMU OF SPECIAL BRANCH HAD INFORMED AUSTIN THAT THEY WOULD BE SENDING SOMEONE AROUND TO THE HOSTEL TO TALK TO HIM FURTHER THE NEXT MORNING ABOUT HIS LETTER. ITIMU ALSO TOLD PETER THAT SPECIAL BRANCH DID NOT REGARD THE MATTER AS SERIOUS BECAUSE HIS REMARK HAD BEEN WRITTEN AT A TIME (1976) SHORTLY AFTER SEVERAL MEMBERS OF THE CHANCELLOR FACULTY HAD BEEN DETAINED ON THE BASIS OF FALSE CHARGES BY THE THEN-SECRETARY GENERAL OF THE MELAWI CONGRESS PARTY MUWALO, AND HIS CRONY SPECIAL BRANCH CHIEF, GWEDE (MUWALO HAS SINCE BEEN TRIED, CONVICTED OF TREASON AND EXECUTED AND GWEDE IS SERVING A LIFE IMPRISONMENT TERM). WHEN THE SPECIAL BRANCH MAN WENT TO AUSTIN'S ROOM AT THE HOSTEL ON WEDNESDAY MORNING, HE FOUND THE DOOR LOCKED FROM THE INSIDE AND WHEN ENTRY WAS OBTAINED, IT WAS FOUND THAT AUSTIN HAD HANGED HIMSELF. HE LEFT SEVERAL HAND-PRINTED NOTES OF WHICH PETER WAS GIVEN PHOTOSTATIC COPIES BY SPECIAL BRANCH BUT PETER FOUND THE NOTES INCOHERENT AND INCOMPREHENSIBLE. PETER BROUGHT HIS BROTHER'S BODY BACK TO LILONGWE AND A PRIVATE CONFIDENTIAL

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MEMORIAL SERVICE WAS HELD AT PETER'S HOME WHICH WAS ATTENDED BY FRIENDS IN THE AREA AND INCLUDED THE WIFE OF SPECIAL BRANCH CHIEF IT MU AND THE WIFE OF THE POLICE COMMISSIONER FOR MALAWI, KAMWANA. HE THEN DROVE THE BODY TO HIS VILLAGE NORTH OF KARONGA WHERE IT WAS BURIED AND HE LEFT THE NOTES WITH HIS FATHER. PETER SAID THAT ITIMU HAD OFFERED TO DISCUSS THE CASE WITH HIM AGAIN AND ANSWER ANY OTHER QUESTIONS HE MIGHT HAVE AFTER TALKING WITH US FATHER AND OTHER MEMBERS OF THE FAMILY AND THAT HE INTENDS TO DO SO THE NEXT TIME HE HAS OCCASION TO GO TO ZOMBA. HE TOLD ME HE DOES NOT SUSPECT FOUL PLAY OF ANY KIND ON THE PART OF SPECIAL BRANCH, ALTHOUGH HE FINDS IT SOMEWHAT STRANGE THAT THE NOTES WERE PRINTED RATHER THAN WRITTEN AND THAT HIS BROTHER'S BEHAVIOR COULD CHANGE SO DRASTICALLY IN JUST TWO DAYS. HOWEVER, HE WAS IMPRESSED BY HIS CONVERSATION WITH HIS BROTHER'S FRIEND AT THE HOSTEL

WHO HAD NOTED A DISTINCT PERSONALITY CHANGE FROM THE TIME OF HIS FIRST TALKS WITH HIM ON SUNDAY AND MONDAY AND HIS STRANGE BEHAVIOR ON TUESDAY. THE FATHER OF MBISA IS A PROMINENT OTD-TIME POLITICIAN IN THE NORTH OF MALAWI WHO FOR A NUMBER OF YEARS WAS CHAIRMAN OF THE

MALAWI CONGRESS PARTY FOR THE NORTHERN REGION

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C O N F I D E N T I A L FINAL SECTION OF 3 LILONGWE 0545

AND WHOSE
YOUNGER BROTHER IS NOW THE TREASURER OF THE PARTY IN THAT AREA.
HIS FATHER IS KNOWN AS A STRONG SUPPORTER OF PRESIDENT BANDA.
HE TOLD PETER THAT HE ACCEPTED THE CIRCUMSTANCES AS DESCRIBED
AND DOES NOT INTEND TO PURSUE THE MATTER FURTHER. PETER SAID THAT
AT NO TIME HAD AUSTIN MENTIONED TO HIM THE EXISTENCE
OF THE LETTER WHICH APPARENTLY TURNED UP IN THE REGISTRAR'S
FILE AT THE UNIVERSITY. HE ASSUMES THAT THE PRESENCE OF
THIS LETTER WAS WHAT MADE AUSTIN REMARK SEVERAL TIMES
THAT HE HAD BEEN "BETRAYED." I EXPLAINED TO PETER
WHY
THE EMBASSY WAS ESPECIALLY INTERESTED IN HIS BROTHER'S
CASE AND TOLD HIM THAT I WOULD REGARD OUR CONVERSATION
AS CONFIDENTIAL.

5. SUBSEQUENT TO THE ABOVE, I CALLED THE SECRETARY TO
THE PRESIDENCY, JOHN NGWIRI, WHO IS IN BLANTYRE, AND
TOLD HIM THE NATURE OF OUR INTERESTS. I EXPLAINED TO
HIM THAT I WAS ASKING VICE CONSUL HURLEY IN BLANTYRE TO
COME AND SEE HIM TODAY TO DISCUSS THE MATTER AND
HAVE GIVEN HURLEY THE NEEDED BACKGROUND AND INSTRUCTIONS.
I HAVE ASKED HIM TO STRESS TO NGWIRI THAT, ESPECIALLY IN
VIEW OF PRESIDENT BANDA'S FORTHCOMING VISIT TO INDIANA,
IT IS EXTREMELY IMPORTANT THAT A FRANK AND STRAIGHT FORWARD
ACCOUNT OF THE FACTS IN THIS CASE BE GIVEN TO US
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FOR TRANSMITTAL TO SENATOR BAYH AND PERHAPS TO THE UNIVERSITY ITSELF. HURLEY WILL BE SEEING NGWIRI AT 4 P.M. ON THIS DATE.

6. COMMENT: I STRONGLY DOUBT THAT POLICE SPECIAL BRANCH USED ANY THIRD DEGREE IN QUESTIONING MBISA OR THAT THERE WAS ANY FOUL PLAY INVOLVED IN THIS CASE. EVEN IN THE TIME OF THE SINISTER GWEDE, TORTURE AND OTHER TYPES OF BRUTALITY WERE NOT A PART OF THE POLICE MODUS OPERANDI. LONG AND GRUELING CROSS EXAMINATION WAS BUT THERE WAS NO EVIDENCE IN THIS CASE THAT MBISA WAS EVEN GRILLED FOR A LONG PERIOD NOR WAS HE HELD IN CUSTODY. MOREOVER, THE FACT THAT HE WAS THE SON OF A PROMINENT PARTY LEADER IN THE NORTH, GAVE HIM A CERTAIN PROTECTION. PETER MBISA SAID THAT HE DID NOT BELIEVE HIS BROTHER HAD BEEN PHYSICALLY MISTREATED IN ANY WAY. BY COINCIDENCE I HAVE BEEN ABLE TO TALK WITH A MALAWIAN WHO KNEW AUSTIN, HAD TALKED WITH HIM IN THE WEEK BEFORE HIS DEATH, AND HAD LEARNED OF THE SUICIDE FROM FAMILY CIRCLES. HE VOLUNTEERED THE OBSERVATION THAT AUSTIN MAY HAVE CRACKED UP THROUGH WORRY AND FEAR THAT HE HAD BROUGHT DISGRACE UPON HIS FATHER BY HIS REMARKS IN THE LETTER. SOMETIME TOMORROW WE WILL HOPE TO HAVE THE GOM'S OFFICIAL VERSION OF WHAT HAPPENED TO REPORT TO YOU. ON OR ABOUT APRIL 20 BOTH NGWIRI AND ITIMU WILL BE IN WASHINGTON IN CONNECTION WITH BANDA'S PRIVATE VISIT. STEVENSON

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Secure: OPEN
Status: NATIVE
Subject: DEATH AUSTIN MBISA
TAGS: SHUM, PDIP, OVIP, MI, (BANDA, H KAMUZU), (MBISA, AUSTIN)
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